

CROWD THEORY THAMESMEAD 2017

EXHIBITION TEXT

An/Un Atomised

The dogs pull at their leashes, two wily massive huskies. A woman peers down from her 6th floor window chewing on an apple. A pigeon angles in above, circles over the people who are milling about on the landing and turns back the way it came, as if checking it out and changing its mind.

The DJ puts on another song, the bouncing bass line of 'Just Be Good to Me' echoing over the lake. A man sat on the benches nods his head. 'I know this one!' he announces. Another man passing by comes up to ask him what's going on. 'Food, delicious – free, water too, all free!' There's just a handful of us standing out here; the atmosphere – loose, drifting, with wisps of purpose floating about – reminds me of block parties in my old neighbourhood. A stage would be set up in the square that was never used for any other purpose, maybe just as a thoroughfare, and otherwise seemingly always feeling abandoned. Organisers would stand at booths, forcibly greeting anyone who came by, when eventually music might begin and disparate groups of people might gather around. It was a way to instil a sense of a neighbourhood, however tenuous and uneasy. The vibe here is waiting, whipping in the strong wind.

The sun starts to set, as five or six small groups of people hover among the benches, speaking largely among themselves. A few children pop in between; one jumps up enthusiastically, and sets off on a race against a friend on a bike down the promenade; the bike is winning easily, but that's not the point. Two ducks fly in, landing on the lake surface perfectly in time with the storming climax of 'The Good, The Bad and The Ugly' theme song that has been playing. A trio of teenaged boys, all hair and denim, slouch against a wall drinking oversized cans of energy drinks. One child, mouth smudged bright blue, wanders around looking dazed and a bit lost, until 'Purple Haze' comes on and he stops, content to bop up and down in place.

And I could say ‘suddenly’ – because it became at some point noticeable, a single cartwheel drawing it finally to my attention, but it was far from sudden – the chilly spring air became thicker: the screams and laughter of a game of tag became that bit louder; the jokes firing between the empty spaces; a crying child following her mother as she dances along, who stops to angrily kick over a hapless bottle of water on the ground near her. The messers, those who fidget and twitch and shout while the photos (ostensibly the reason we’re here) are being taken, feel like they own the night. The woman on the sixth floor has by now decorated her window with fairy lights and is dancing exuberantly with a friend to ‘Vogue’, swinging around blinking bike lights; people down on the promenade wave, take pictures.

Somewhere, in this empty lakeside lot, a wider-ness has arisen between those of us gathered here. An event is simply a gathering of moments, one not unlike the next. And what actually makes up what you might call a carnival feel seems hard to pin down; there isn’t one group of people here, whether those who might live in Thamesmead or nearby, or those like myself just passing through. But there’s a willingness to share, to exchange a little bit more freely within a time and a place. And just as soon as you might notice it, it’s gone again.

Landscape architect Dean MacCannell wrote in the 1990s about the figure of the tourist, the floating visitor who thought they could go anywhere in the world and understand it all. He wrote of this idealised travel as a fictional journey to an ‘empty meeting ground’ that is actually ‘not really empty. It is vibrant with people and potential and tense with repression.’ MacCannell was writing at a time when ‘multiculturalism’ was coming into its own, a sort of flattening of differences between the wildly varied constituents of any place over time: he considered this the ‘postmodern community’, one which fancied itself as an enabling saviour of communities worldwide but was actually a form of soft fascism.

Twenty years later, as the people gathered begin unevenly to disperse again, as the promenade empties, the nature of this meeting ground now becomes more apparent. As public spaces give way to privately owned squares, as the shared senses of publics erode, accurately imagining what gathering means becomes a necessity. We cannot capture community, or claim an overall understanding; but we can create contingent meetings, tense exchanges or wheeling mini-carnivals, where friends and fractures, known and unknown, are all part of the picture.